

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory SEDL Response June 23, 1999

Introduction

This document is the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's (SEDL's) response to the Peer Review Panel's Synthesis Report, which was prepared as part of the interim evaluation of the first three years of SEDL's operation of its FY96-00 regional educational laboratory (REL) contract.¹ SEDL has organized its response to align with the organization of the Peer Review Panel's report. It includes four main sections that correspond to the four Phase III standards that guided the evaluation. Each section acknowledges the strengths identified by the panel, addresses the panel's issues and recommendations, and as appropriate, describes steps that SEDL is taking in response. Discussion of these steps is embedded within each "Issues" section.

Implementation and Management

Strengths. The peer review panel identified six strengths in its review of SEDL's REL work related to the first standard. These include: (a) the presence of able and visionary leadership, (b) the presence of sound management structures and communication systems, (c) the organization's intensive focus on identified client populations, (d) the internal review process that led to restructuring, (e) the quality assurance process, and (f) the use of feedback from clients and customers to improve the quality of products and services. These are all important features of a strong regional laboratory program, and we appreciate the peer review panel's acknowledgement of these.

Issues. The panel also identified several issues for consideration that require additional comment from SEDL. First, the panel urged the organization to fill the two vacant leadership positions, one in the specialty area and one in evaluation and policy studies. As noted by the panel, SEDL management is equally concerned about these vacancies. Since the peer review panel's visit, SEDL management has convened an advisory committee of national leaders to discuss the vacancy in the specialty area leadership position, reviewed its efforts to recruit a candidate with committee members, and developed additional strategies based on their guidance. In terms of the second, the decision to place all of SEDL's internal evaluation work under one office, and to include in that office responsibility for REL policy work, was a recent one, made earlier this year. The

¹ The Regional Educational Laboratory Contract is one of several contracts held by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Throughout the peer review panel's report, reference is made to SEDL rather than to the specific contract under review. We have chosen to follow the panel's nomenclature. However, the reader should remember that the panel's comments refer to SEDL's performance on the REL contract and not to the overall organization.

notice of vacancy for the position was posted in early spring of this year, and SEDL is now in the middle of interviewing potential candidates. SEDL hopes to fill this position shortly.

A second issue raised by the panel concerns SEDL's reliance on Federal funding. SEDL has begun to pursue other sources of funding, including foundation support and fee-for-services contracts. SEDL has secured funds under both of these sources in the recent past, and will pursue others as it learns to navigate these different resource streams. In addition, SEDL has recently hired a development specialist to specifically work on diversifying SEDL's funding base.

A third issue is the panel's concern about the limited collaboration across programs/goals.² The panel neglected to acknowledge three opportunities for cross-program collaboration, including the assignment of all programmatic staff to quality assurance teams where they have the opportunity to review and discuss colleagues' work, organization-wide professional development days on critical issues, and a project designed to bring individual programs/goals to work together in field sites (viz., Facilitating Implementation of Reform Strategies and Tactics, or FIRST); this project was mentioned later in the panel's report as part of the REL's comprehensive school improvement strategies. In addition to these existing structures, SEDL has begun exploring the use of study groups to provide another opportunity for staff members to work together across programs/goals.³ Since the panel's site visit, a study group has been convened, focusing on the use of co-developers across the programs/goals. As the panel's report noted, the co-developer model has great potential for scaling-up SEDL's work and we thought it important to look at its use across the REL.

The panel also urged SEDL to increase its use of external reviews in the quality assurance process. While SEDL has used external reviewers extensively, such use is at the discretion of individual program/goal managers. SEDL will examine ways to systematically integrate external reviews into its quality assurance process.

The last issue raised by the panel concerned the development of a coherent, comprehensive database that transcends individual programs/goals. SEDL already has developed a database to collect information relevant to the RELs' performance indicators. Insufficient details were provided in the panel's report to make clear exactly what else should be contained in such a database beyond performance indicator data. Also, this issue was not discussed in interchanges between SEDL staff and panel members during the site visit, thus we are unsure about what else to include and how it would be used.

² This issue was also raised by the peer review panel under the Outcomes and Impacts standard. SEDL has decided to address this issue in this section only.

³ This strategy has been used informally by staff members to study critical issues in their work, and we are now looking at using this strategy more formally.

Quality

Strengths. Three strengths were identified by the peer review panel, including: (a) the exemplary nature of SEDL's field-based developmental model, (b) the selection process used to ensure the readiness of field sites to work intensively with SEDL, and (c) SEDL's tailoring of products and services to meet the needs of intended audiences. All three of these strengths focus on the organization's field-based development work, of which SEDL is very proud.

Issues. The panel expressed concern that the generalizability of SEDL's field-based development and later scaling-up efforts may be compromised by the customized work that occurs in SEDL's implementation sites. We believe that this concern is unwarranted. The extensive R&D knowledge base on innovation and change suggests that adaptation will always occur when innovations are implemented in different sites. We have purposefully built in the expectation for adaptation to meet the particular context of each site. SEDL's field-based development work related to a particular innovation (e.g., student-centered learning enhanced by technology) is built around a common set of principles and strategies for engaging teachers and other clients. These are adapted to fit the context in each site. SEDL's field-based development work related to an innovation generally occurs in a minimum of five sites (one per state). Although clearly not representative of the entire range of possible sites in the region, the five sites do provide SEDL an opportunity to test the effectiveness and generalizability of the innovation across sites and its potential for scaling up. The co-developers who work with us, and test the innovation in other sites, provide additional data on its generalizability and scaling up potential.

The panel suggested that SEDL place greater emphasis on securing student success/impact data and organizing the data in a meaningful and usable way⁴. As the panel pointed out in several places in its report, the "centerpiece of most of SEDL's RD&D projects is professional and community development: to change teacher practice, to create professional learning communities, and to enhance family and community active engagement in education." As panel members also recognized in their discussion with SEDL staff (but did not include in the synthesis report), this presents a dilemma not only to this organization, but many others in educational R&D. On the one hand, most of SEDL's data collection resources are focused on adults with whom we directly work (e.g., teachers, administrators, community representatives). On the other hand, it is important to tie adult changes to student outcomes and so we have dedicated some resources to the latter. As the panel acknowledged, the adult-student linkage is made even more difficult because of other variables that also influence student results. However, SEDL concurs with the panel that it is important to examine the relationships between adult and student outcomes. As stated in its proposal and

⁴ This issue was raised in several sections of the peer review panel's report. SEDL has decided to address it in this section only.

evaluation plans, SEDL will shift additional data collection resources to focus on student outcomes as changes in the intervening adult outcomes are documented.

A third issue raised by the panel concerned the possible duplication of effort in program and product development. The panel suggested stronger relationships to others in the field working on similar issues. We agree that tighter linkages to other researchers and practitioners would strengthen SEDL's work. In an effort to strengthen such linkages, SEDL will explore the possibility of establishing advisory teams for each of the program areas. Such teams would consist of appropriate content and process experts, who, based on their knowledge of the field, will help SEDL better connect its work to related efforts taking place both regionally and nationally.

The final issue identified by the panel focused on the make-up of SEDL staff.⁵ As noted on page 2 of the report, 30 percent of SEDL's staff are minorities. There is some variability across programs/goals. Both the SEDL Board of Directors and management have reinforced the need to increase the diversity of staff throughout the organization. Recognizing that the limited representation of minorities continues to be a problem throughout the REL system and the educational R&D community in general, SEDL has decided to push forward on four fronts. First, SEDL has begun targeting recruitment efforts to higher education institutions that enroll high concentrations of minority students; this new strategy has already generated a greater pool of minority candidates to review. Second, we have decided to hire some staff who are very early in their careers and support their growth and development as R&D professionals; we have hired one Hispanic male with this in mind. Third, SEDL will seek the advice of various groups (the Board, its Institutional Review team, the Language and Cultural Diversity Advisory Committee) in increasing the diversity of its staff. Finally, recent changes in SEDL's compensation system concerning initial salary level ranges for new hires, will make it possible for us to compete financially with other organizations for qualified minority staff.

Utility

Strengths. To quote the advisory panel, "In a phrase, one major strength of SEDL is they have satisfied customers." The panel reported that SEDL staff members are aware of clients' needs and very responsive to them. In addition, SEDL has multiple ways of sharing information, including publications, workshops, and an active web site.

⁵ The opening section of the panel's report, Brief Overview of the Laboratory, indicated that out of 100 staff, there were 41 in intermediate supervisory or director positions. This reading is misleading. There are 68 professional staff managed by 11 directors.

Issues. The panel's report indicated two areas where additional assistance was suggested by clients: student success/impact data⁶ and alignment of SEDL's programs and services with state and district initiatives. Both suggestions surfaced as part of the panel's discussion with clients during the site visit. Both are new requests, and SEDL will follow up on each immediately.

The panel also urged SEDL to increase its visibility. SEDL has numerous strategies for connecting with educators and the R&D community including its quarterly newsletter (SEDLetter, which is sent to every school superintendent and every school principal in the region), its bi-monthly publication to board members and other influential individuals in the region (SEDL Links), its targeted individual program/goal newsletters and briefs, articles in other journals and magazines, and presentations. In spite of these efforts, there is more work to be done. This topic will be a key component of the fifth year plans of the individual programs/goals.

Outcomes and Impact

Strengths. The panel was asked to review the outcomes and impacts of SEDL through three lenses: (a) the extent to which the REL's work contributed to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites, (b) the extent to which the REL assists states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies, and (c) the extent to which the REL has made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area. The panel found strengths in all three areas.

In terms of the first, the panel found that SEDL's initiatives not only have students at their center, but are of national significance. In addition, SEDL has developed comprehensive evaluation plans for each project and collects data directly related to the purposes and goals of their programs and services.

In terms of the second, the panel reported that much of SEDL's work addresses the need to improve education through "whole school" change and improvement, noting two specific programs. Goal 6 staff assist state and local personnel in making comprehensive school-wide changes. The use of the Regional Policy Analysts and Advisors Network supports comprehensive school improvement via the policy arena and the legislative process.

Finally, the panel noted that the specialty area work is ongoing under less than optimal circumstances. They pointed to the exceptional products and the developing work of the cultural diversity program. They also commended SEDL's willingness to terminate projects in the specialty area that were no longer feasible because of changing external circumstances.

⁶ This issue also was raised under Outcomes and Impacts. SEDL has decided to address it in this section only.

Issues. Most of the panel's comments related to SEDL's work in the first two outcome/impact areas concerned the collection and analysis of student outcome/impact data or the integration of work across the REL. These have been addressed earlier in our response. The panel made two other points, both related to evaluation. The panel suggested that SEDL should develop an overall evaluation plan in addition to the plans for individual programs/goals. All of the individual evaluation plans for programs that focus on changing adult practice are based on a common framework of knowledge utilization. The use of such a framework will help us assess whether the different approaches to knowledge utilization being employed by the different programs are leading to different results. Nonetheless, having an explicit plan for doing this work is sound advice, and SEDL will move forward in drafting such a plan. In addition, the panel expressed confusion over the mismatch between the research questions identified by some programs/goals and the evaluation questions included in their evaluation plans. As their names imply, these two sets of questions serve two separate purposes and thus focus on different issues.

Three concerns were expressed about the specialty area work. In addition to the need to fill the specialty area leadership vacancy, the panel expressed concern about the regional and national recognition of SEDL in its specialty area. SEDL management believes that the leadership vacancy and recognition issues are related, and share the panel's concern. SEDL has continued to co-sponsor events regionally and nationally as one strategy to maintain its presence (e.g., Texas secondary education bilingual conference with the Texas Education Agency, the Border conference with CRESPAR). However, strong leadership will be needed to build SEDL's presence in this field, and we are vigorously pursuing filling that vacancy.

The third concern focused on the "stand alone" nature of the specialty area. The panel believes that SEDL should integrate language and cultural diversity through all Laboratory programs. We do not disagree with this goal. In fact, we think it is critical given the region that the REL serves. We have some modest experience in linking the specialty area with other program work (e.g., the specialty area and policy work on public engagement) that we can mine for advice on how to proceed. We have begun discussions with each of the program areas to determine how to best achieve such integration, and will describe the steps we intend to take in our next annual plan.

One misstatement needs to be corrected. The panel suggested that SEDL had pulled back from exercising leadership in the specialty area in the cross-Laboratory network project. This is incorrect; leadership for this project is shared with the other two RELs who have this specialty area, and SEDL plays an active role in shaping the cross-lab's work.

Conclusions

We commend the Peer Review Panel for its work. The interim review of the RELs was a tremendous undertaking with limited resources and time. Both the process of preparing for the review, and the opportunity to interact with the panelists was very helpful to our organization. We learned a lot about our work, and received some sound and valuable advice. We are gratified that the panel found so much that was positive in our work, yet we recognize that there are areas of needed improvement. With the review complete, we now look forward to working on the panel's recommendations.